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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses early literacy activities provided in and sponsored by libraries. Some of the factors that impact the lives of the children and families that libraries serve are summarized, including the percentage of the population under 18, racial and ethnic diversity, family structures, percentage of children in childcare, low birth weight, the birth rate for adolescents, percentage of children read to at home, early childhood center enrollment, and ability of children entering kindergarten to recognize letters. A definition of emergent literacy is presented, and the role of public libraries in addressing emergent literacy is discussed. Several early literacy programs provided by public libraries, state agencies, and national associations are described, including programs at the Providence Public Library (Rhode Island), the San Mateo County Library (California), the Multnomah County Library (Oregon), the Duluth Public Library (Minnesota), the Vermont Center for the Book, Motheread, Inc. (North Carolina), and the Association for Library Service to Children. (Contains 16 references.) (MES)

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## Early Literacy Activities in the USA

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Good afternoon. My name is Carole Fiore. In addition to being the youth services consultant with the Florida Department of State, Division of Library and Information Services, I am also an independent library consultant specializing in services for children and young adults. Today, however, I am here today with my third hat on. I am here today as president of the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association. When I told my associates that I was going to be attending the International Federation of Library Associations conference here in Boston, they said that it was a shame that it was not in some more exotic or foreign location – like Amsterdam or Jerusalem or Havana. My response was that for me Boston was somewhat foreign. Here, many people talk with an accent – and I've never been in Boston before. So, even though we are in the United States, Boston is somewhat foreign to me, and I am delighted to be here with you today.

Before I begin my formal presentation, I would like to invite all of you to a tea that the Association for Library Service to Children, the organization that I am representing today, will be hosting immediately after this program. The tea will be held just outside this room. I would be delighted to talk with all of you at what I am sure will be an enjoyable event.

My topic today is something that I feel passionate about – early literacy activities in and sponsored by libraries. My training is two fold: I earned my bachelor's degree in early childhood and elementary education; and my master's degree in library science. Working with early literacy projects combines my interests into something that can and does make a difference in our communities and for the people that live in them. And making a difference – that is making an impact on the community – is an important thing for libraries to do. If what the library is doing does not make a positive impact on the its users and potential users, than it is not worth doing.

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But, if you what to know that what the library is doing **is** making an impact on the community, it means that you must know what the problem is. And the problem here in the United States is that many children do not enter school with the literacy skills to be ready to learn at their optimum.

While there are many indicators of children's well-being, libraries cannot necessarily address all these social problems. But libraries need to be aware of the factors that impact the lives of the children and the families that they serve. For example:

- In 1999, the most recent year for which we have statistics, there were 70.2 million children under age 18 in the United States, or 26 percent of the population, down from a peak of 36 percent at the end of the baby book in 1964. Children are expected to remain a stable percentage of the total population as they are projected to comprise 24 percent of the population in 2024. Updated statistics will be available as soon as all the data from the 2000 census is released and analyzed.

- The racial and ethnic diversity of America's children continues to increase. In 1999, 65 percent of U.S. children were white, non-Hispanic; 15 percent were black, non-Hispanic; 4 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander; and 1 percent were American Indian or Alaskan Native. The number of Hispanic children has increased faster than that of any other racial or ethnic group, growing from 9 percent of the child population in 1980 to 16 percent in 1999.

- The family structures children live in have become more varied. The percentage of children living with one parent increased from 20 percent in 1980 to 27 percent in 1999. Most children living with single parents live with a single mother. However, the proportion of children living with single fathers doubled over this same time period, from 2 percent in 1980 to 4 percent in 1999.

- In 1999, 54 percent of children from birth through third grade (approximately 8 years of age) received some form of childcare on a regular basis from persons other than their parents. This is up from 51 percent in 1995. This means that fewer parents bring their young children to storytimes that are presented on weekday mornings. Knowing this helps library adjust their schedules and program offerings.

While libraries cannot specifically address the health needs of children, library programs can assist the health care community to do that. Here are 2 of the medical indicators that relate to early literacy.

- The percentage of children born with low birth weight (less than 5.5 pounds) or very low birth weight (less than 3.3 pounds) has steadily increased since 1984. And these children are more at risk for developmental delays than babies born at normal weight.
- The birth rate for adolescents dropped by more than one-fifth between 1991 and 1998. In 1998, the birth rate for 15- to 17-year-olds was 30 percent per 100 females in that age range, the lowest it has been in at least 40 years. Even though the teen pregnancy rate has dropped, it still is a significant problem.

Later in this presentation you will hear about several program where libraries work hand in hand with the health care community to improve the lives of children.

The following indicators relate specifically to education – indicators where many people would see the logical involvement of libraries.

- In 1999, 53 percent of children ages 3 to 5 were read to daily by a family member, the same as in 1993, after increasing to 57 percent in 1996.
- Between 1996 and 1999, the percentage of children not yet in kindergarten who were enrolled in early childhood centers rose from 55 to 59 percent. The largest increases were among children living in poverty, children with mothers who were not in the labor force, and black, non-Hispanic children.
- Upon entering kindergarten in 1998, 66 percent of children were able to recognize letters and 29 percent knew the sounds and letters that begin words – important skills in developing the ability to read.[1]

These are just some of the problems facing the children of the United States – and therefore facing the libraries that serve them. But now we also need to know what emergent and early literacy is and what libraries can do to help address these problems.

The Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, has partnered with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), to provide information and training that is designed to assist parents and teachers of preschool children get ready to read. They have defined emergent literacy as:

> . . . what children know about reading and writing before they can actually read or write. Young children's emergent literacy skills are the building blocks for later reading and writing. Children learn these skills before they start school, and this begins in infancy. From birth throughout the preschool years, children develop knowledge of spoken language, the sounds from which words are formed, letters, writing, and books. This is the beginning of the abilities that children need to be able to learn to read and write in school. [2]

Public libraries are uniquely suited to address the issue of emergent literacy. As I am sure you are aware, public libraries are one of the few agencies that are positioned to work with members of their communities from the cradle through the grave. Not only that, local public libraries are the great economic equalizers in the community. There is no other agency that is free and available to all community members from birth and throughout their lives. Public libraries ensure equity of access for all citizens and community residents. Public libraries also link families to information and education resources within the library and to other community services and programs.

Traditionally, public libraries have offered story times for preschool children. But several years ago, those of us who work with young children, their parents, teachers, and care givers, came to the realization that reading begins before children came to us for storytimes at the age of 3 or 4 years of age. Through practice and experience, children's librarians realized what PLA and NICHD have recently defined. And children's librarians put into practice what PLAs and NICHDs research is now documenting.

Practitioners -- front line children's librarians -- work in partnership with various community, social service, and education agencies within each of their communities to put into practice many varied and exciting programs that address the literacy needs of children and their families. Many of these programs are based on the brain research that has recently made headlines in our national press. Both *Time* and *Newsweek*, popular newsmagazines here in the US, published special issues highlighting these findings. While I am not a neuroscientist or a physician, I have come to understand the basic scientific concepts of the brain research that these publications and others have made available and understandable to lay people.

I would like you to look at this transparency. The two brains that are shown here are the brains of two children of the same age. The noninvasive procedure that permitted these scans to be taken was not available to researchers 10 to 20 years ago. Without the CAT scan – computer assisted thermography – the only way a researcher previously could look at a brain was during an autopsy. With this new technology, researchers can see how a person's brain functions – in real time, as it functions. Now back to these CAT scans. The one on the left shows the brain of a "normal" child, a child who has had numerous literacy experiences. Notice the red and orange areas. These bright colors show that there is lots of brain activity happening. The synapses are making connections. This brain is working and growing. Now look at the brain on the right. Notice the dark areas within the circles. These areas have not developed as they have in the child that has had lots of experiences – lots of language and literacy experiences. The child on the right was raised in a Romanian orphanage and was not held. No one spoke with this child on a regular basis. No one sang nursery rhymes for this baby. This child was not read to. This lack of stimulation has resulted in a human brain that does not function at its optimum. This child has been left scared for life. While some areas of the brain are resilient, some areas cannot be regenerated – no matter how much stimulation if provided to the child later in life.

In a report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics in March 2000, the US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement summarized research by several people. The report states:

> Children begin the process of learning to read long before they enter formal schooling. . . For decades, research has shown that children whose parents read to them become better readers and do better in school. But reading to children is not the only activity that helps children become readers and to do better in school. Activities such as telling stories and singing songs may also encourage the acquisition of literacy skills.[3]

The report also states that 49 percent of children whose families took them to the library at least once in the past month show three or more signs of emerging literacy compared to 33 percent of children whose families did not take them to the library in the past month.

Research has also found that the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.[4] Nationally, one out of five children enter kindergarten lacking basic print familiarity skills and one out of three children do not recognize alphabet letters. Libraries have responded by designing programs that encourage reading aloud and other such literacy activities. So, by designing these programs and encouraging and promoting library use, libraries are contributing to the literacy experiences of children and their families.

Libraries can and do work with parents to provide them the skills and confidence to interact with their own children. Libraries provide the programs and materials to help parents to become effective first and most important teachers of their children.

For instance, the Providence (RI) Public Library is a "Family Place" library. In this all-encompassing program, the library offers many early childhood services. One of programs for very young children and their families is *Cradle to Crayons*, a program for children ages 1 to 3 and their parent or caregiver. This parent/child workshop engages 10 to 15 children and their parents or caregivers in five sessions involving playing in a room full of developmentally appropriate toys while in conversation with outside experts on child development, speech and language, nutrition, and movement issues. Many libraries across the US are participating in similar Family Place programs.

Another early literacy program is on the West Coast. The San Mateo (CA) County Library, working in partnership with other agencies, created the Literacy Network Committee. This network is

made up of agencies and individuals who are concerned with literacy. Jeanine Asche, the library staff member involved with this project approached the county health department that was launching a prenatal-to-three initiative. As this initiative was designed to be a holistic approach to early childhood healthcare, the library was able to able to contribute to this, as literacy is a key factor in maintaining good health and a healthy lifestyle. Because of this partnership – involving the library, the health care agency, and community service and literacy agencies – the group was able to apply for – and receive – a grant from the Peninsula Community Foundation. The application the previous year without the cooperative partnerships was not funded. One of the main components of this program is the take-home early literacy book bag that encourages low-income families to read together.

A library system in the northwest has numerous programs for very young children. The Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon has such a strong commitment to early childhood services that they established a separate department – Early Childhood Resources Department -- 12 years ago. Since access to books is extremely important to developing literacy skills, this library has a Book Delivery program that visits over 250-child care centers, family child care homes, social service agencies, and Head Start Programs. Each site receives 50 children's picture books every two months. To help the staff of these agencies meet their continuing education needs, the library also offers six professional development group training opportunities each year. To enhance their Language and Literacy Mentoring program, the library has been the recipient of a county Commission on Children Families and Community grant to encourage literacy development in children. They have produced two videos – Born to Succeed and La llava del excito – to encourage parents to read to their children. The library is currently producing another pair of videos in English and Spanish that will show how to read to children. Libraries throughout the nation have purchased the materials they produced to enhance their local programs.

As you may have noticed, many of these programs are successful due to the multifaceted nature of the programs and the various partner agencies that are involved. No one library or agency can address all the problems that I discussed at the beginning of this paper. No one agency has the staff, skills, contacts, or money to reach the large numbers of potential clients. Partnerships, collaborations, and cooperation with other youth serving agencies are the keys to the success of these programs.

Early literacy programs in libraries are not limited to the east and west coasts. The Duluth (MN) Public Library received a grant from the Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation to initiate and expand their Book Time with Your Baby program. Officially launched in June 1999, this is now an ongoing cooperative initiative between the Duluth Public Library, the Duluth Area Family Services Cooperative, and other area agencies serving children, families, and caregivers. It includes a publicity campaign (to improve community awareness of issues related to early literacy); educational programming for parents, caregivers, and professionals; and fundraising to ensure that the program can continue. The fundamental message of Book Time with Your Baby is that sharing reading with infants and toddlers stimulates brain development, helps prepare children for reading, creates excitement about learning and encourages imagination – and can be both free and fun! Perhaps most importantly, it also strengthens the emotional bond between a caregiver and a child. The act of reading with a child says, "You're important; we're important together; what we are doing is important." In one year, the program reached 1283 adults and 645 babies and young children in 92 programs. In addition, library staff presented 27 prenatal classes reaching approximately 1000 adults. Not only that, hospital volunteers presented approximately 2500 books to newborns, making an effort to share Book Time information directly with parents.

Not only have local libraries initiated programs, state agencies and national associations have provided model programs that can be replicated at the local level.

The Vermont Center for the Book, in cooperation with the National Science Foundation, created a program called "Mother Goose Asks 'Why?'" The program provides a family activity guide introducing

science through great children's literature. Through a variety of grants, this program has expanded to many other states. The Vermont Center for the Book has worked in cooperation with the Vermont State Library and the Vermont Department of Education to expand content and reach. The expanded program content includes "Mother Goose Meets Mother Nature," "Count on Mother Goose," and "Growing with Mother Goose." The latest expansion is "Mother Goose Cares about Literacy and Living Together." This, as with all the other "Mother Goose" programs is grounded in the literacy prerequisites for preschool children, including phonemic awareness, book awareness, print familiarity, vocabulary development, story, rhythm, rhyme, and the relationship of print to meaning. During this new pilot project, 400 child care providers in Ohio and Vermont will be trained.

Motheread, Inc. is a multidimensional national literacy organization that began as an intergenerational approach to developing literacy skills. Based in Raleigh, North Carolina, this organization has developed a curriculum based on outstanding, multicultural children's books and provides a training institute that teaches participants how to implement their instructional model and curriculum in their local communities. The 24 hours of training that institute participants receive teaches them how to work with parents to improve their own literacy skills, how to help children become better readers, thinkers, and problem-solvers. These activities not only help with literacy development, but also improve family communication. One area of the curriculum is B.A.B.Y. – Birth and Beginning Years. This segment of the program uses children's literature as a basis for discussion of prenatal and child development themes, while teaching skills related to emergent literacy. As more libraries learn about this program, they are sending staff for training and implementing the Motheread approach in their communities.

The medical community has also developed a program that incorporates a holistic approach to health and literacy. The Reach Out and Read program, that comes under the bigger national umbrella of Prescription for Reading, has pediatricians "prescribing" reading as part of the sixth month well-baby check-up. As I previously stated, there is a direct relationship between health and well being and literacy. My problem with this well-accepted program is that it waits to connect children and their families with books and reading until the baby is 6 months old. Considering that brain development begins even before birth and is explosively developing during the first year of life, it seems a waste of precious time not to utilize those vital first six months of life when those synapses are developing.

The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), whom I am representing today, has not ignored the literacy needs of children. The Association has been the driving force behind two national initiatives that address the literacy needs of children and their families. The first is the Library-Museum-Head Start Partnership. This project administered by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress ran from 1992 through 1997. This partnership project started out as a collaborative project between the ALSC and the Head Start Bureau of the US Department of Health and Human Services. In 1994, the Association of Youth Museums joined the collaboration. This project was designed to demonstrate that in communities across the country, libraries that serve young children and their families can plan and work with Head Start grantees and classroom teachers to enhance learning and to involve parents and other primary caregivers and families in children's literacy and language development. While this project is "officially" complete, the lessons learned during its implementation are still in practice.

This successful project was followed by the Born to Read project. Began as a national demonstration project by the ALSC and originally funded by the Prudential Foundation, the Born to Read project established five demonstration sites. The purpose of this program, as many other projects I have discussed here today, was to provide parents – especially low literate, low income, and/or teen parents – the skills and materials to allow parents and other primary caregivers to provide age and developmentally appropriate literacy experience for their children. This national demonstration project had libraries working in partnership with a health care provider in their local communities.

In 1996, I was able to initiate a statewide Born to Read program in my state, Florida. Utilizing federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant funds, we established ten pilot sites. Over the past several years, we have been able to expand this early literacy program to libraries in over 25 of our 67 counties. Many of the projects are funded with LSTA grant funds that are administered by the Florida Department of State, Division of Library and Information Services, the agency I work for. Some of these projects started by using state family literacy grant funds, while others used local funds to start and/or continue the projects.

A while back, someone asked me what contributed to the success of the local BTR programs in Florida. I responded that there really are two primary reasons for our successes:

> First, rather than having the library partner only with a health care partner, our programs also have to have a community service partner. Involving other agencies from the beginning insures community buy-in from the start. This buy-in ensures that when grant funds are no longer available, the community will be behind the project and that usually guarantees its continuation. Secondly, we provide training and sample materials for all of our grantees. In addition to providing an annual capacity building workshop for all grant recipients – including staff and volunteers from the partner agencies, I have done numerous training sessions for other child serving agencies. Many times, it is as a result of these outreach programs that libraries are brought into the loop when another agency is interested in establishing an early literacy program. Other agencies are recognizing the expertise that our public library children's staff has.

As part of our statewide program, we produced a video that shows why we in Florida are putting such an emphasis on BTR in Florida. It also shows some of the materials and training we provide, and most importantly, what impact the Born to Read program is having on our target population. I invite you to sit back now, and see how we have implemented Born to Read – Florida Style.

(Show Video)
(Answer questions)

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